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# No Ordinary Pilgrim: Margery Kempe and Her Quest for Validation, Authority, and Unique Identity

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NO ORDINARY PILGRIM:  
MARGERY KEMPE AND HER QUEST FOR VALIDATION, AUTHORITY, AND  
UNIQUE IDENTITY

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Robert Barfoot, who patiently cooked, walked the dog, and honored the “do not disturb sign.” Most importantly, he willingly and diligently edited my writing for which I will be forever grateful. Thank you with all my heart.



NO ORDINARY PILGRIM:  
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ALICE A. BARFOOT

**Abstract**

Movement in literature is a technique used by authors to uncover richer and deeper meaning which cannot be expressed in mere words. Margery Kempe autobiographer, employed movement both literally and figuratively through her pilgrimages to establish her identity as saintly, exceptional, and authoritative. Margery's overarching desire to create this persona for herself is examined through her life's writing, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Her *Book* is studied dually in this thesis, as a treatise on the use of both physical movement and written movement, called the movement/writing model, to understand a woman who possessed extraordinary insight in how to employ the most validating tool of late medieval England, the pilgrimage, to establish herself as chosen. Margery's movement/writing model is further explored by using Jacques Lacan's theories of the gaze and the real. Using Lacan's theories, Margery's textual utilization of the pilgrimage as a promoting language can be better appreciated. Through these three aspects: movement, writing, and reader focus, Margery's desire to establish herself as a unique, exceptional, and holy woman of her time is better

understood, especially considering late medieval constraints. Ultimately, Margery's pride coupled with her devout religiousness was crucial in her decision to choose the pilgrimage to establish herself as an authoritative voice; although in doing so she often pushed the bounds of accepted propriety. Margery's fervent commitment to be perceived as uniquely holy, not only in the eyes of God but also her community, was a challenge she embraced with an honest straight-forward approach of pilgrim/writer.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Movement has always played an important part in literary dialogue. Movement is the adrenalin of thought that compels the reader to look beyond mere words and follow in the authors' footsteps in order to uncover richer and deeper meaning. From D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, highlighting long sun dappled walks across wide open fields, to Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* in which the characters are seemingly static; motion has been an important aspect in literary conversation. Movement is used by authors as a pointer toward something significant which is often more profound and complex than can be described with simple text. Pilgrimage, the journey to holy destinations for reaffirmation and validation of faith and self, is one type of movement which will be explored in depth in this essay. Margery Kempe is the pilgrim, and through her words the journey will be analyzed both figuratively and literally. Margery Kempe enlisted the help of a scribe to document her travels which began, albeit in small steps, after the birth of her first child in the year 1393.<sup>1</sup> Margery Kempe's document, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, will be explored, in terms of movement in three ways: first--through the use of

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Great Britain: Athenaeum Press Ltd, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear, 2003), 5.



pilgrimage to establish herself as exceptional and authoritative, secondly--textually through those same journeys which allowed her the freedom to establish her unique and unconventional religious persona--and lastly through the eyes of twentieth-century psychoanalysis, specifically Jacque Lacan's theory of the gaze.<sup>2</sup> The finding of Margery's *Book* during the important development of Lacan's theories gives a fresh perspective in understanding Margery's tact in using the dialogue of movement to reflect her saintliness. Discovery of Margery's text during the new psychology of linguistics is an interesting juxtaposition which, I propose, can better help understand Margery's unique self-promoting style.

This analysis will closely follow Margery's *Book* and use her words to demonstrate how she draws on pilgrimage to exemplify an exceptional life which seems to flaunt every societal and religious convention of her time.<sup>3</sup> Other than Margery's words, which are from the fifteenth century, all other critical research is drawn from twentieth and twenty-first century critical debate. This is because other than a sixteenth-century redacted version, Margery's *Book* was left unnoticed until rediscovered in 1934. This modern discovery presents a unique conundrum explained by Clarissa Adkinson: "Neither the author, her calling, nor her book fit conventional categories."<sup>4</sup> The unique and personal tone of Margery's story, coupled with difficulty finding a definitive genre to place it, allows open interpretation. These interpretations, starting in 1934, have evolved over the years, from believing Margery to be a hysteric suffering from post-partum

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<sup>2</sup> Maria Scott, "Lacan's 'Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*' As Anamorphic Discourse," *A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* (November 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Margery Kempe will be referred by her Christian given name, Margery, when not addressed as Margery Kempe. This follows the tradition of referring to Medieval women in literature by their given names.

<sup>4</sup> Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 21.

depression, to an astute feminine author, able to craft a realistic story out of fictional details.

Using modern formulas of critical debate to analyze why Margery wrote in a style not employed by previous medieval women authors makes her writing somewhat suspect in the eyes of some medieval theorists. Clarissa Atkinson and Lynn Staley in particular, propose that Margery may have carefully crafted a work of fiction to promote an extraordinary saintliness. Because pilgrimage is often used as a symbolic metaphor for mystical movement, the argument has some compelling factors. However, Margery's extreme physicality, as described in her text, seems to overflow with a fervent passion that is continually active. Therefore, the belief that she did actually experience the journeys of which she writes is not difficult to consider as valid.

David Aers explores Margery's gradual disassociation with her family and her push to gain acceptance and validation through her religious community. In this way, he believes, she built her reputation as holy and informed by engaging with clerics and establishing her religious, not earthly identity. Margery asserted her individuality with pilgrimage, its validating stamp for those who went on them discussed by Susan Signe Morrison. Morrison reveals how important she believes society played in Margery's choice to present herself as special in the family of the pilgrims. The desire for elite status reveals itself early in Margery's *Book* when she describes herself in this way, "Sche had ful greet envye at hir neybowrs that thei schuld ben arayd so wel as sche. Alle hir desyr was for to be worshepd of the pepul."<sup>5</sup> These two sentences are an important

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<sup>5</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), lines 201-202. These and all subsequent quotations that are cited directly from Margery Kempe's writing will be taken from this publication.



factor in understanding Margery's desire to not only be perceived as equal, but to be honored as exceptional, which supports Morrison's claim.

The emergence of the medieval sense of self is explored by Martin Thornton and Colin Morris. Thornton believes Margery's life is a reflection of ordinary Middle English people; however, the ability to be a nonconformist, although sometimes dangerously, within this developing age permits her to do extraordinary things. Using her feminine voice is one of those ways, whether it is by speaking or writing. Timea Szell, David Lawton, Albrecht Classen and Betsey Price examine Margery's unusual presentation of herself which is described dually as sincere and masterful. Margery's exceptional skill in presenting a text that continues to confound critics into the twenty-first century can be better understood by eliciting help from twentieth century psychoanalysts, specifically Jacques Lacan and his publication *Language of the Self*: "the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other."<sup>6</sup> Although I have found no direct evidence of other critical theory connecting Lacan and Margery's text, I believe Lacan's focus on the importance of voice being perceived and accepted as valid is insightful in understanding Margery's use of the pilgrimage as a promoting language. It is Margery's over-arching desire, "to be worshiped of the people" which, I believe, compelled her to not only document her religious experiences but to also have lived them.<sup>7</sup>

This passion for living evinced through her text is a pilgrim spirit. Her physicality as demonstrated in the *Book* reveals a woman who seems to overflow with fervor for her religion. The contention that Margery's pilgrimages are fictional does not fit the picture of many women during this time, since pilgrimages were not uncommon. For Margery,

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins Press, 1968), 31.

<sup>7</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, line 202.

who had fourteen children, started businesses, plus attended Church for hours each day, a mere pilgrimage once in a while does not seem unreasonable. Margery, extremely gregarious and sometimes outrageous at a time when a woman could be neither of these, challenges the debate of critics who argue that her life's journeys are fictional. I propose Margery uses the physical aspect of the pilgrimage to promote her unique identity which she eventually translates to the *Book*, in order to establish herself in perpetuity as an exceptional holy woman of her time both in the eyes of God and her community. I also suggest Margery intended, from her initial pilgrimage to write, but only after she had exhausted her ability to demonstrate through movement her exemplary life as she explains, "And sche seyde that it was not Goddis wyl that thei schuld be wretyn so soon."

<sup>8</sup> It is my belief that the combinations of movement-writing were used by Margery to create a uniquely holy persona which directed her audience's gaze toward her role as holy pilgrim. Although pilgrimage has been studied as a genre, looking at the journey in the context of Lacan's perception of language provides a uniquely clear understanding of Margery's goal in committing her trips to paper, which was ultimately to promote her saintliness.

Using the movement-writing model to understand the necessity Margery placed in her Pentecostal driven exhibitions of faith, whether the experience was in church or on her pilgrimages, can be better understood by exploring faith based worship popular during the later medieval period. Atkinson's descriptions of "affective piety" will be an important aspect in understanding why Margery felt safe in using seemingly extreme methods to demonstrate her religion. <sup>9</sup> This type of personal devotion was a response to

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<sup>8</sup> Kempe., *The Book of Margery Kempe*, line 772.

<sup>9</sup> Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, 129-156.



church corruption and its extremely strict guidelines which fueled a strong Franciscan influence. I propose that the combination of two emerging influences, Margery's involvement in overt personal religious devotions and the developing expression of medieval self created the fertile ground necessary for Margery to stage herself as extraordinary.

## CHAPTER II

### PHYSICAL PILGRIMAGE: QUEST FOR HOLINESS

Medieval pilgrimage was an opportunity to publicly demonstrate devout progression on well traveled paths. Finucane explains that pilgrimage, for most pilgrims, held “the desire to gain some benefit in this world as well as the next.”<sup>10</sup> For Margery, the pull of the journey enabled her to demonstrate her piety in extraordinary ways and her gain is in presenting herself thus. Margery’s devout connection to heaven flows naturally from her text; however, what is more subtle is the use of her various journeys to demonstrate her specialness. Margery never seemed to just visit a place, pray, collect a relic, and then leave which was common practice. Timea Szell explains how Margery’s movements on her journeys always seemed to encompass something to amaze her readers, starting with the example of her climb of Mount Quarentyne:

. . . first her companions refuse to help the creature up; then a “Saracen,” for nominal payment, carries her to her desired destination; whereupon her fellow pilgrims once again refuse to help her in her thirst . . . In her sojourn in Leicester . . . she is ignominiously jailed as a troublemaker and potential heretic and thrown into a cell full of male prisoners; she is rescued by a merciful jail keeper . . . summoned by a lascivious steward; she is saved, just in the nick of time, by the jail keepers wife . . .<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 46.

<sup>11</sup> Timea K. Szell, “From Woe to Weal and Weal to Woe,” *Margery Kempe*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York & London: Garland Publishg, Inc., 1992), 79.

Margery's readers immediately understand that she is no ordinary pilgrim. Pilgrimage, which was often arduous in its own right, was given epic proportions when Margery traveled. One is immediately cognizant that this unusual pilgrim is special. Her suffering at the hands of Christians, specifically fellow pilgrims, presented a woman willing to endure great adversity for her faith. Thus, Margery commanded more space, caused more upheaval, and suffered more vitriol, which ultimately granted the influence over her text needed for her holy affirmation.

Medieval understanding of the validating power that the journey conferred to the pilgrim would have been an accepted fact for the religious community at large. I propose Margery's *Book* speaks to the reader using actual personal experiences which always seem to encompass movement complicated by diversity. She explains at the beginning of her book, "Than went sche be the byddyng of the Holy Gost to many worshipful clerkys, bothe archebysshoppys and bysshoppys, doctowrs of dyvynyte and bachelers also. Sche spak also with many ankrys. . . ." <sup>12</sup> These trips, in themselves, were affirming demonstration of faith that defined her credibility and uniqueness. She used contact and conversation with religious authorities to place herself in a superior position within her Christian community. Margery went to church to meditate, traveled to speak with holy men and women, visited shrines, and eventually made difficult pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and lastly Prussia.

It is the religious journey, the holy passage, the actual walking in and to sacred spaces that connected the spiritual with the temporal. This walking allowed an independence from the strictures of parish life and a chance to "see" and experience

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<sup>12</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 49-52.



oneself in a unique way. Paradoxically, Margery strived for a valued place in her community, but was often seen as a non-conformist who distanced herself from their shared traditional values. Staley suggests “the *Book* define[s] the distance Kempe has created between Margery and her community by imagining her as the figure whose communal value ultimately lies in her *dissociation* from society.”<sup>13</sup> Margery seemed compelled to find a richer spiritual link for her soul through movement away from her community.

Margery, deeply affected and influenced by religious devotions, was propelled to act, to move. Because medieval pilgrimage was a validating action which garnered social and religious respect, it is not surprising that Margery, always gregarious and opinionated, seeks out this overt endorsement of faith, especially when commanded to do so by her Lord, “Go forth, dowtyr, in the name of Jhesu, for I am the spirit of God, the which schal helpyn the at al thy nede, gon with the, and supportyn the in every place, and therfor mystrost me not.”<sup>14</sup> These words, as related by Margery, are an emotional directive straight from God to trust Him, and find herself in a self affirming manner in the steps of those who have gone before. She moved not only in the validating manner of her faith, but also by divine directive.

Pilgrimage was a mystical movement embraced by many women, and was the “drive for ‘mor’ . . . (more pardon, more absolution, more indulgences) . . . [and was] potentially both effect and cause of a compulsive discontent, a haunting anxiety.”<sup>15</sup> I would suggest that the desire for “mor” was precisely what Margery was searching for. Status and validation, employing pilgrimage as the conduit, was her culminating religious

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<sup>13</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, line 80.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 1765-767.

<sup>15</sup> David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity* (Great Britain: T. J Press Ltd., 1988), 79.

act, the chance to impress in current and future minds her uniqueness as a spiritual martyr for Christ. Ultimately, pilgrimage provided Margery the freedom to unburden herself of the smaller and common concerns of her parish communities and the opportunity to relate personal struggles with the journey as backdrop. A vivid description of a return trip from York accompanied by her husband was also a way to present the power that pilgrimage held in resolving difficult issues; this one in particular concerned her wish to be celibate. Margery's husband would have none of the idea unless she would agree to three things: to pay his debts, to give up fasting and eat meat with him on Fridays, and to continue to share their marital bed. It is interesting to note that the physicality of the journey provided the ability for her to hear God's Word and eventual solution to their dilemma, "And than owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst with get swetnesse spak to this creatur, comawndyng hir to gon agen to hir husband and prayn hym to grawntyn hir that sche desyred. And he schal han that he desyreth."<sup>16</sup> Margery deftly related the holiness of her journey, which again included divine intervention, a step above what most pilgrims experienced, which I propose, placed her in the enviable position she preferred and promoted.

Margery capitalized on these experiences, the routes and places made holy by thousands of previous religious sojourners. These courses permanently etched by human footsteps over mountains and fields, and their ultimate destinations resonating with prayers and hope, were the ultimate religious validation for which a medieval person could strive. Morrison gives a sense of the meaning of the pilgrim path by using Yi-Fu Tuan's meaning of "valued space": "The pilgrimage route functions as a 'place', just as a

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<sup>16</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 559-561.

shrine does...habitual use ...acquires a density of meaning.”<sup>17</sup> The significance behind the journey could range from desire for personal gain to abject contrition. Pilgrimage was a physical language that expressed personal desires. In Margery’s case it has been suggested, especially by Lynn Staley, that Margery may have created a fictional pilgrim persona.<sup>18</sup> Whether Margery actually journeyed or just wrote of traveling is a continuing debate. This debate will continue as there is no way to test its validity. However, keeping in mind Margery’s physicality, I propose the argument raises doubts that she would have sidelined herself from the one action that was the supreme validating demonstration for her holiness, the pilgrimage.

Margery’s religious practices appear to have helped her understand and define her uniqueness. Each day she walked to her church and said her prayers, and I believe in doing so, grew into the strength she would need for the longer journeys ahead of her, by listening to and developing her inner spiritual voice. Margery writes that her journeys to numerous English holy places such as Canterbury and York, and also her conversations with holy men, anchorites, and friars elicited emotional turmoil from both religious and secular communities. I suggest these contentious experiences served as a medium for the establishment of her individuality. Margery, however, was ready to leave English parishes and her country to embark on the ultimate expression of faith and a broader exposure of her unique religious persona. In her words she explains, “owyr Lord bad hir in hir mend two yer er than sche went that sche schuyld gon to Rome, to Jherusalem, and

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 84.

<sup>18</sup> Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 171-199.



to Seynt Jamys.”<sup>19</sup> Pilgrimage carried Margery away from the constricting space of her parish and allowed her to experience a wider religious family, which, I believe, she knew would ultimately help in her achievement of a broader audience and ultimately assured saintly validation.

Thus, for Margery traveling was the vehicle for her vocation, the best method for getting herself seen and heard. For a woman to be a pilgrim was not unusual in late medieval England. Although the process could be time consuming and expensive it was not an uncommon event. Permissions would have to be granted by religious and secular or political authorities while these seats of power were experiencing numerous internal and external upheavals. England was in her post-Plague era and mandates attempting to control itinerancy had been put in place.<sup>20</sup> Susan Morrison cites David Harvey’s evaluation concerning strictures placed on the populace, “Those who command space control the politics of place. . . . measures controlling movement were framed for economic reasons and to help prevent changes in the social order from taking place or getting out of control.”<sup>21</sup> The rules and regulations for a pilgrimage included obtaining permission from the king (if your class warranted it), permission of your husband (if female), and permission from your confessor; there was also Letters of Protection, which gave power of attorney in the instance of not returning home, paying of all debts, and often the making of a will, were required.<sup>22</sup> Margery took two years to prepare for her first journey: raising money, settling debts, and obtaining spiritual affirmations.

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<sup>19</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 725-726.

<sup>20</sup> David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 40-47.

<sup>21</sup> Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 41.

Margery the pilgrim emerged; up to this point she had practiced her faith under the watchful eyes of her fellow countrymen and more closely by her parish. Atkinson relates, “The Church and its preaching stood at the center of social and spiritual life for most medieval Christians; for one such as Margery Kempe it became her world.”<sup>23</sup> However, now that the transformation to worldly pilgrim was begun Margery shed the confines of the parish and firmly stepped upon the path of her vocation. Margery’s devout practices and “dalyawns” with her Lord gave her a sense of the authority needed to confidently take her faith onto the pilgrim path.<sup>24</sup> Religious condemnations in the form of ridicule, ostracism, and threats of death did not sway Margery as much as fear of the devil’s influence. She needed to prove first to herself that her visions and meditations were holy and not evil, put there by the devil to fool her. She had to walk the path of a religious and have discourses on the questions she had of her faith. Atkinson details Margery’s devotional path, “she could not be perfectly sure—for long—that the devil might not interfere. In her own mind and in the teaching of the Church her feelings required “proving” by persons recognized as authorities in the discernment of spirits.”<sup>25</sup> Margery’s pilgrimage route was her proving ground, a movement toward respect and validation, a place in her larger religious community. To accomplish this she would explore the saintly footsteps of those, especially women, who had gone before her. In this way she could show she belonged to a select few and was on the correct path for convincing others of her exceptional status.

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<sup>23</sup> Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, 115.

<sup>24</sup> The term “dalyawns” is used by Margery Kempe throughout her *Book* to describe very personal meditations in which she has two way conversations with Christ.

<sup>25</sup> Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, 120.



It is important to note that a pilgrimage for Margery was not only spiritual but would also give her an authority that those who went on pilgrimages earned just by going on them. Being a pilgrim, especially having visited Jerusalem or Rome was a status symbol and added to that, assured you a place in heaven. In her written account Margery discusses her sojourns which would have included all the major holy places visited by the Church's faithful of all countries. The Church encompassed many traditions and countries seeking divine solace and direction. Ronald Finucane explains, "there was not only an Italian and an English medieval Church . . . there was a French Church and a Spanish, an Icelandic and a German, each with its own history, traditions, liturgical uses and saints."<sup>26</sup> The bridge from the Pope to the villager and his parish priest was long and diversely traveled, open to various interpretations. Thus, Margery placed her feet on the pilgrims' path toward the holiest places of her religion, and the more she traveled the more assuredly was her direction. In her own words she explains, "Thys creatur, ... had a desyr to se tho placys wher he was born and wher he sufferyd hys passion and wher he deyed, with other holy placys wher he was in hys lyve and also after hys resurrexyon."<sup>27</sup> The short journeys to her church and her experiences there have been the impetus to become closer to her Lord; and the best way to do that, in her estimation, was to go where He actually walked.

Pilgrimage for Margery would be the venue chosen for her to display and practice the devotion felt so strongly inside. She disturbed the parishes when she visited them. Her movement to and her actions at these holy places, such as York and Canterbury, and as far away as Rome, were often disturbing to the order of religious hierarchy. She placed

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<sup>26</sup> Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 722-724.

her self in grave danger by being arrested, jailed, called a heretic, ridiculed, and accused of lechery, so that even her husband, always supportive, reached a limit of acceptability:

On a tyme, as this creatur was at Cawntyrbury in the cherch among the monkys, sche was gretly despysed and reprevyd for cawse sche wept so fast bothyn of the monkys and prestys and of seculer men ner al a day bothe afornoon and afternoon, also in so mech that hyr husbond went away fro hir as he had not a knowyn hir and left hir aloon among hen, cheys hir as sche cowde, for other comfort had sche noon of hym as that day.<sup>28</sup>

However, Margery seemed to gain a sense of validation during these times of mockery and ridicule. Public derision appeared to feed her passions as she recalled her Lord had to suffer these types of public insults also. Why, she thought, should she be spared what He could not? Margery, never embracing mediocrity, seemed to gain strength from devotional martyrdom by roaring, instructing, scolding, and weeping on her journey, a journey of tradition in a Pentecostal soul. These derisive encounters, although sometimes frightening, were more importantly making a name for her, and gradually establishing her unique identity for posterity. However, if Margery's journeys were to promote herself as saintly and her book a hagiography, her outspoken non-conformist personality may have been somewhat of a hindrance. This is shown in an instance in London when Margery's reputation (those involved not realizing it is of Margery whom they speak) is made sport of during a dinner party; and Margery replies, "Lo, serys, . . .ye aut to seyn no wers than ye knowyn and yet not so evyl as ye knowyn. Nevyrthelesse her ye seyn wers than ye knowyn, God forgeve it yow, for I am that same persone to whom thes wordys ben arectyd, wech oftyn tyme suffir gret schame and repref and am not gylty in this mater, God I take to record."<sup>29</sup> This type of out-spoken encounter, which included clerics from the bishops house, may explain why her book was overlooked as a valued saintly text.

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<sup>28</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 620-625.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., second book, lines 588-592.

She continually pushed the boundaries of feminine acceptability. I propose however, that this type of pugilistic verbal sparring reflects a woman who would go to any lengths to promote and defend her saintliness. Pilgrimage, the most validating of all holy methods, would have been embraced with dogged tenacity to demonstrate, physically and eventually textually, a deserving place with other saintly women.



### CHAPTER III

#### TEXTUAL PILGRIMAGE: QUEST FOR VALIDATION

Margery begins to write her *Book* at the age of approximately sixty-three years old, several years after her last pilgrimage which was to Prussia. During her active pilgrim years she had a contemplative conversation with Christ: “thow hast ronnyng aftyr me; I wold fallyn in dyspeyr, and thu woldyst not suffer me.”<sup>30</sup> These seemingly homely words spoken from her to Christ, gives a sense that Margery has been a challenge to keep up with, even for the Almighty. The tone of her devotion shifts; however, after completing her final pilgrimage. Her previous physicality seems to switch to transferring forty years of holy movement to a document. Subsequently, her lack of overt demonstrative devotion because of hours spent in chambers working with her scribe worried Margery; she was, however, reassured when the Lord spoke to her of her concerns: “I have schewyd to the plesith me ryght meche and he that writith bothe. For, thow ye wer in the chirche and wept bothyn togedyr as sore as evyr thu dedist, yet schulde ye not plesyn me mor than ye don wyth yowr writing, for dowtyr, be this boke many a man schal be turnyd to me and belevyn therin.”<sup>31</sup> These validating words are

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<sup>30</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 1155-1156.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 5145-5149.

meant for her reading audience but also in part for herself, a reassurance that now is the time to document her journeys.

Authorship was a complex subject during the Middle Ages and the question of whether she actually went on the pilgrimages about which she writes persists. This question may never be definitively resolved and therefore her goals, rather than her agenda may hold the ultimate answer. Exploring the genre of medieval women writers may help to better understand Margery's writing and the woman she depicts on the pages of her *Book*.

For Margery and women in general to write required support from confessors and men of the clergy, and Margery makes sure the reader understands she has these endorsements. She cited numerous instances in which she recounted clerics who gave credence to her holiness. This is exemplified in a visit with her husband to Philip Repingdon, Bishop of Lincoln:

Whan the tyme cam, sche schewyd hym hyr medytacyons, and hy contemplacyons, and other secret thyngys bothe of qwyk and of ded as owyr Lord schewyd to hir sowle. He was rygth glad to heryn hem, and suffryd hir benyngly to sey what hir lysted, and commendyd gretly hir felyngys and hir contemplacyons, seyyng thei wer hy maters and ful devowt maters and enspyred of the Holy Gost, cownseleng hir sadly that hir felyngys schuld be wretyn.<sup>32</sup>

Margery's account of her meeting with the Bishop is helpful to her in two ways. Firstly, he complements her religious devotions which, he says, are inspired by the Holy Ghost. His words bestow a privileged sense of holiness to Margery's worship. It is highly probable that Margery hoped she would be canonized. During one of her meditations Mary, Christ's mother, speaks to Margery, "... plenowr remissyon ... is not only grawntyd to the but also to alle tho that belevyn and to alle tho that schul belevyn into the

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<sup>32</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 766-772.

worldys ende that God lovyth the and schal thankyn God for the.”<sup>33</sup> It is understood Margery is granted complete forgiveness of all her sins, but more importantly, able to intercede for penitents who pray through her to God.

Acceptance of her intimate relationship with the Godhead could validate her writing as a hagiographical work which would require ecclesiastical support, and the Bishop puts his stamp on that. Repingdon not only praises her devoutness, but counsels her to write. Ultimately, Margery’s credibility relies on her audience’s acceptance that she is writing directly from instructions sent from God, “contemplation was the outcome of special grace, and therefore fully Christian and supernatural . . . a wholly God-given experience of the union of the mind and will with God. . . . a divinely assisted penetration of the mysteries.”<sup>34</sup> Margery demonstrated a religious exclusivity of divine inspiration when she explained to the bishop that she will write but not just yet as it is not God’s desire. Her words demonstrate an intimate connection with God, conferring her with respect and credibility. Equally important, I suggest, she planned to write but not until she exhausted her avenues of holy physicality.

It is not hard to imagine Margery wishing to add her name into the annals of holy women. Her dictated religious sojourns can be considered a marketing tool for her in which she illuminates her close relationship with God and the good works she does in His name. Martin Thornton describes Margery as “an ordinary Christian matron, an ordinary parishioner, who nevertheless did some very extra-ordinary things.”<sup>35</sup> This down to earth persona who had frequent conversations with Christ and His family would seem to appeal

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<sup>33</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 4161-463.

<sup>34</sup> Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Thornton, *Margery Kempe: An Example in the English Pastoral Tradition* (Saffron Walden, Essex: The Talbot Press, 1960), 3.



to women readers. There is much of the feminine in her writing. She writes of her difficult childbirth, her close relationship with the Virgin Mary, and her friendship with Mary Magdalene. Margery's meditative moments are often spent taking care of the Christ child, begging for clothes for the infant, and ministering to Mary and the saints. Her writings are often homely and comforting which would appeal to women readers, Margery writes, "I have gret cawse to ben mery and joyn in owr Lorde that hath holpyn me and socowryd me."<sup>36</sup> Margery's simple language is reassuring and consoling. Thornton argues that, "she did not write her book as a Ph.D. thesis but as a help to her fellow-Christians."<sup>37</sup> This is true in part; however, I suggest Margery's goals were much more complex and her ambitions less altruistic and more self-serving in promoting herself than Thornton gives her credit. By insinuating herself into the saint's lives and seemingly actively attending them, she is raised to the rank of a "holy woman".

It is worth noting that Margery's book was never translated to Latin which historically had been a stamp of ecclesiastical validation on the journey to sainthood. Latin was the language of the church and Margery wrote in the vernacular. It is certainly a devotional work and meant to be read, at least in part as such, but what is more profound is that she would have been very aware that the validating language was Latin as Lynn Staley stresses, "[Margery] understood the meaning of and thus the need to assert mastery over communal and literary codes."<sup>38</sup> Margery's decision to depend on the vernacular for the messages in her book may have merely been a reflection of changing times. The fourteenth century experienced a move toward the vernacular in many other countries also, such as France, Italy and Germany. Prayer books, formal

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<sup>36</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 2411-2412.

<sup>37</sup> Thornton, *Margery Kempe: An Example in the English Pastoral Tradition*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, xii.

documents, and literature are translated to and flower with native dialogue. England's Chaucer and Langland have opened an important path in the use of the vernacular, and Knowles suggests, "the age was the first in which we catch a glimpse in our fellow-countrymen of those characteristics of language and mind which we recognize as English."<sup>39</sup> Margery's precocious, perceptive, and self-promoting nature seemed to be the combination necessary to create late medieval firsts, the first saintly autobiography written by a woman in Middle English vernacular. The question of why the Latin translation never occurred cannot be answered definitively, but what we do know is that Margery felt confident in her words and her unique identity. It is also important to note that late medieval people were developing a strong sense of self, and as Betsey Price explains, the emerging use of the vernacular was the result of "the growing need of individuals to experience *through language* their personal connection to their God, their ruler, and their imagination."<sup>40</sup> The use of Latin as a means of expression, both written and verbal was limiting and did not seem to meet late medieval needs. This is in part because by the thirteenth and fourteenth century most lay people were literate in only their vernacular, not Latin, and "there was a constancy of interest in vernacular expression and of cultural motivations and objectives."<sup>41</sup> Julian of Norwich also wrote her meditations in English, and St. Bridget wrote in Swedish, her native language. I suggest for Margery vernacular was the language of choice for her book for two important reasons: first--it was a language she fully understood, and second--she may have believed she would be more widely read using the language familiar to her fellow

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<sup>39</sup> Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition*, 47.

<sup>40</sup> Betsey B. Price, *Medieval Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 94.

<sup>41</sup> Price, *Medieval Thought*, 112.



countrymen.<sup>42</sup> Of the three women only one was canonized, St. Bridget, her meditations translated into Latin by her confessors. St Bridget lived an exemplary saintly life; it was however, a life that fit into acceptable theocratic parameters. David Lawton suggests, "It is conventional . . . , for the works of women mystics to be mediated in some way by their confessors . . . [however] *The Book of Margery Kempe* . . . deprive[s] the mediator of any authority whatever: it emasculates the pen."<sup>43</sup> Unknowingly, Margery was most likely the author of her undoing in creating a feminine voice too strong for her male confessors to have the courage or desire to translate.

For Margery, her desire for respect and validation from her readers and her community seemed to define her strategy in the *Book*. Lynn Staley presents Margery as an astute communicator. Staley proposes that Margery's use of the third person in her narrative is a strong indicator of Margery's clever ability to present a piece of devotional fiction as a treatise on her life. It is Staley's belief that Margery is the author, and "this creatur" in her *Book* is her protagonist or subject. Staley suggests Margery was aware "of the need for strategies to conceal or disguise . . . strongly original and, in some cases, destabilizing, insights into systems of theological or communal ordering."<sup>44</sup> As Staley indicates, Margery seemed to be keenly aware of the conforming limits in regard to her community; therefore, using the third person "this creatur" she fashions a piece of literature that will satisfy the church and herself.<sup>45</sup> The *Book* promotes a vision she had of herself as saintly, and occasionally, according to Lynn Staley in *Margery Kempe's*

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<sup>42</sup> Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition*, 46-47.

<sup>43</sup> David Lawton. "Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*", *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 100-101.

<sup>44</sup> Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Sandra J. McEntire, "The Journey Into Selfhood: Margery Kemp and Feminine Spirituality", *Margery Kempe A Book of Essays* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 51-69.

*Dissenting Fiction*, allows her to execute well concealed irreverent jabs at church hierarchy. Knowles acknowledges this precept and goes even further when he mentions that scholars “editors and most readers agree that her story gives an impression of basic sincerity.”<sup>46</sup> There is no doubt however, that she raises controversy and interpretive debate has surrounded the text for the past seventy years using a five hundred year old yardstick. This has resulted in numerous and controversial new age, twentieth century critiques, such as Lynn Staley’s suggestion that Margery’s work might be considered more fiction than autobiographical. These diverse theories concerning Margery and her writing, fuel Margery’s legend and the controversies inherent in historical semiotics.

Margery is a mystic who taught through prose examples, specifically of her pilgrimages and she certainly was courageous and even outrageous at times. Atkinson explains, “Margery had no intention of writing theology . . . the episodes and anecdotes . . . are her own and not the conventional exempla of contemporary preaching and hagiography. . . [She] meant her book to be a witness, not a theological treatise.”<sup>47</sup> The *Book* was her pisteology of faith supported and validated by numerous references to her mentors, such as her close relationships with influential friars and prelates. Philip Repingdon, who was the bishop of Lincoln, gave her money to buy white clothes, although he did not agree with her wearing them, and asked her to keep him in her prayers. She also wrote of the papal legate in Constance who defended her against her fellow pilgrims’ ire, and Richard Caister, vicar of Norwich who became her friend and defended her reputation against those who sought to disparage her.<sup>48</sup> Margery’s book illuminates her unique religious contemplations in a narrative which “like the Wife of

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<sup>46</sup> Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition*, 143.

<sup>47</sup> Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, 24.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 119-120.



Bath . . . tells stories, and the stories are not directed to teach some other sinner the road to salvation but to describe her own passage that way.”<sup>49</sup> Margery told the story of her life instead of instructing, and is what set her writing apart from other hagiography.

It is important to look closely at the proposal that Lynn Staley presents in regard to *The Book of Margery Kempe* and its veracity. It should be remembered that Margery dictated her book forty years after some of the events occurred. I suggest her memory is remarkable and because of that, others such as Staley view its veracity as somewhat suspect. I propose however, that much of her book was focused on events that happened during her pilgrimages, locally and abroad. Because a pilgrimage was an extraordinary event, details would most likely have made an indelible impression on Margery’s memory. Staley however, as previously mentioned, invites the reader to look at the *Book* as a piece of useful self-promoting fiction for Kempe the author. Staley also presents Margery as an amazingly astute woman who carefully crafted her vocational voice into a dialogue which Staley calls a “strategy of dissent”.<sup>50</sup> I agree with Staley that for Margery to tell the story of her life would demand careful strategy, but also suggest Margery’s strategy did not have to preclude the truth, and that her *Book* partakes of many genres; however, fiction is not one of them.

Lynn Staley’s proposal concerning the fiction of the *Book* has some compelling aspects. Staley suggests Margery’s documented return of her last journey is a recreation of the return of Henry V’s homecoming to London with his French captives. Staley proposes the return of Margery and Henry are similar in performance, “both are designed to stage a drama of community and to do so by exploiting the relationship between the

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<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong, “Understanding by Feeling” in *Margery Kempe’s Book*, Margery Kempe *A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 19.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

as safe as yyf thei wer in Seynt Petrys Cherch. “<sup>55</sup>

She does not present a travel log, only religious concerns, so not to distract her readers from her intended goal. Donald Howard relates, “There is not in her book a scintilla of traveler’s curiosity, so we get no bananas, giraffes or elephants from Margery; not even descriptions of the shrines.”<sup>56</sup> Howard, along the lines of Staley, calls Margery a raconteur. I propose that they both miss the core of Margery’s writing which was simply to keep the focus on her religious exclusivity.

Margery Kempe’s book explains her unique religious passion but most importantly, transports the reader on the journey of her life. Her writings probe spiritual nerves in an attempt to personally and publicly validate the physicality she demonstrated during her religious quest. As a woman, Margery understood that great care must be taken for her book to be honored and respected, and her literary and social place within “The web of discourses and social practices . . . which it [her book] was made and which determine its horizons.”<sup>57</sup> To accomplish this goal meant writing with her contemporary medieval audience in mind. Margery was astute enough to understand the societal limits she faced and cleverly negotiated them by using acceptable tools to further her self-validating efforts. One of these tools was the male scribe.<sup>58</sup> It is not known for certain if Margery was able to write, but she chooses to depend on the use of scribes to translate her pilgrimages to text. Margery’s collaboration with a scribe was an important authorizing stamp of authenticity for her book.

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<sup>55</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 2342-2345 and 2349-2351.

<sup>56</sup> Donald R. Howard, *Writers and Pilgrims, Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, University of California Press, 1980), 35.

<sup>57</sup> Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*, 11-17.



The author Margery, by using an authoritative voice through the help of a scribe, was able to create her unique feminine persona. To understand how she accomplished this, it is important to study two important aspects in her writing, her scribe and her method of presentation. The medieval scribe served dual purposes for the author.<sup>59</sup> They of course copied what was dictated to them; they also edited, interpreted and could even change the meaning of a text. Diane Watt prefers the term secretary over scribe which suggests a closer collaboration between author and writer, “the term secretary carries with it connotations of confidentiality, trust, and intimacy not present in the term scribe, with its connotations of professional disinterest.”<sup>60</sup> Collaborative efforts of author and scribe/secretary were common during the Middle Ages. Authors could create distance between themselves and their writing, as Chaucer did in his *Canterbury Tales*, by using “A scribe’s “defaute of tonge” as an excuse for veiled innuendos.”<sup>61</sup> Watt’s preference of secretary over scribe suggests a confidential reliance that better fit Margery’s relationship with her transcriber. She depended on the scribe’s belief in her holiness and his judicious transcripts in crafting her story. Margery, perceptive in understanding the power of the scribe’s endorsement, was freed to present her unique identity through this partnership.

Margery, who performed as writer/author, gave written examples of her unusual crying and roaring devotions and her intelligent and sometimes contentious discourses with the clergy, which highlighted her exceptional piety. She did this because she firmly believed, and wanted the public to believe, she was chosen by God. She was very adept at choosing the way she presented herself knowing that her actions must fit acceptable guidelines. Staley suggests Margery’s “keen ear for language and acute sense of literary

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<sup>59</sup> Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fiction*, 13.

<sup>60</sup> Diane Watt, *Medieval Women’s Writing* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 12-13.

<sup>61</sup> Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*, 13.

strategy combine to create a persona as vivid as any of Chaucer's characters.”<sup>62</sup>

Margery's scribe did not merely write; he became a believer as Margery dictated remembered events. As a witness the scribe used his pen to illustrate and teach about her holy life. Through Margery he instructed the religious community about a particular exemplary life and even a personal experience. This event occurred when he was miraculously able to translate an unreadable first draft of Margery's book written by another. Through Margery's interception with prayer “he is suddenly able to read the broken English of her first scribe and to do the work he had at first agreed to do.”<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, scribal authority presented Margery the freedom to carefully craft a credible history of redemption and holiness.

Pilgrimages were often undertaken for personal reasons other than the spiritual and it can be surmised that Margery wrote of hers in order to illustrate her uniqueness in the journey.”<sup>64</sup> Margery recognized the powerful effects of this type of movement; “Pilgrimage is a social construct and is viewed by society, represented by that society, and interpreted by that society” Morrison explains.<sup>65</sup> Margery pictured herself through her hagiographical writings allowing the reader to visualize her saintliness. White clothing worn on her journeys, emulating virgin martyrs, persecution from skeptics, miracles performed--as in her prayerful pleas for rain to put out a fire and then blessed with snow--demonstrated a Divine connection. These and other signs of saintliness were used to label Margery. Pilgrimage, however, which was even more powerful than speech,

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<sup>62</sup> Staley, *Margery Kemp's Dissenting Fictions*, 31.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>64</sup> Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 4.



was the preferred and most validating tool of choice in part, because of its ability to demonstrate active piety.

Pilgrim journey and space were important conduits for active piety, and Margery used them both in her dual roles of writer and actor. Morrison suggests, “her book functions as a script performed by the author. By becoming a public spectacle and performer, she threatens the society she acts before.”<sup>66</sup> Margery’s text is rife with examples of those whom she makes uneasy with bellicose confrontations on her numerous journeys. Margery, as writer, created a warrior or soldier for Christ. Certainly, the actor Margery played the part to perfection, doggedly instructing and reminding all those she encountered of their saintly duties. She demonstrated and played the protagonist on the pilgrimage stage, script carefully crafted with controversial white virginal costume at the ready.

The years of 1434-1436 were the frame time of the Book’s creation, the period in Margery’s life when memory was transcribed to manuscript. Memory encapsulated Margery’s life. Commitment to memory of the scriptures, deep meditation on them, and subsequent public responses to them defined, “the living heart of memory.”<sup>67</sup> The memory of Christ’s life and passion fueled her desire to visit the holiest of places:

For Kempe, then, remembering Christ’s life and death is realized in her present time. Her time becomes Gospel time. She lives in the memory of gospel time. The historical events of Christ’s birth and death exist in Kempe memory. ...These moments become ‘real’, like dramas perpetually played out on the stage of her soul for her spiritual eye to witness.<sup>68</sup>

She used her writing as the stage to perform her piety and ultimately to create the persona of a blessed woman. She embraced her religion with the fierceness of living

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<sup>66</sup> Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, 131.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

memory, and her roars and tears reverberated on the pages of her text. With her footsteps she imprinted herself onto the page, filled it with a living passion.

Margery Kempe ended her book with a prayer and this is the last we hear of her. One can imagine her finishing the last line and quietly closing the pages. The scribe and she must have felt some awe in the shared experience. Her scribe, after all, became a firm believer in her holiness, and even received the gift of tears. The book found five-hundred years later is a copy of the original. The original is lost, perhaps passed from hand to hand, inspiring future religious rebels. Perhaps destroyed, considering its unconventional and controversial author; perhaps buried with the author who is believed to have died in her sixties, probably not long after her book was completed. Margery's carefully documented beginning in life stands in sharp contrast to the end of her life. Her birth, marriage, children, her temporal life as it was begun, has a clear public record. Interestingly, her last twenty years are documented only by linking the earthly with the heavenly. Her life became a documentation of a spiritual journey, recorded memories of moments with Christ and His family, and a search for a place within that saintly realm.

Margery led the reader on her journey, crafted a unique individuality. It is hard not to imagine Margery musing over the rediscovery of her book, and the contemporary thoughts and philosophies attributed to her through her manuscript. The explosion of psychoanalysis during the early part of the twentieth-century, which urged the resolution of internal conflicts for true self-knowledge, would seem the perfect age to bring Margery back to life through her book. Margery's frightening illness at age twenty seemed to awaken a dormant internal conflict on sin and forgiveness. Her self-knowledge was discovered when she cleverly extricated herself from male theocracy and leaves the



confines of community to create her unique character. She became the saintly wanderer, scolding and instructing, focused on her journey. This confidence is demonstrated with a physicality that astounded, annoyed, and angered many of her contemporaries. Margery skillfully used the tools at hand, such as the scribe and clergy affirmations, to demonstrate sanctioned authority. Margery's last lines in the *Book* conclude with this prayerful plea, "And for alle tho that feithyn and trustyn er schul feithyn and trustyn in my prayerys into the worldys ende, sweche grace as thei desiryn, gostly er bodily, to the profite of her sowlis, I pray the, Lord grawnt hem for the multitude of thi mercy."<sup>69</sup> Margery asks God to bless all those who believe in her. She asks for her audience's trust. Her words are the footsteps of her unique pilgrim identity. If she has been successful in presenting, or, as some believe, in crafting, a very singular medieval woman, this is up to the reader. What is certain, however, is the use of the pilgrim's role in offering a look, a perception of someone unique in her time. She walked, and then she wrote, and forever committed herself to memory in the pages of her book.

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<sup>69</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Second Book lines 798-800.

## CHAPTER IV

### MODERN THEORY

Analyzing Margery's journeys and her text within modern psychological parameters presents interesting opportunities. Clarissa Atkinson suggests: "The candor of her narrative and the quality of her experience lend themselves without undue distortion to psychoanalytic categories."<sup>70</sup> Atkinson cites Freud and his conception of hysteria—Margery has often been given the hysterical label; sexual anxiety—Margery's tension in actively lusting and wanting to be celibate; and religious extremes—such as Margery's loud and uncontrolled weeping. I suggest, for this paper's edification, Jacques Lacan and his theory of the gaze will be valuable in understanding Margery's promotion of herself through pilgrimage.

Analysis had been nonexistent for Margery's book until the twentieth century when her treatise was rediscovered and the pages open to critical review. Liz McAvoy gives a sense of the surprise Margery's literary voice made to her astonished twentieth century audience, "[Margery] emerged from the folios of this elusive manuscript, and her self-revelation as noisy, dramatic, affective and highly emotional woman was to send

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<sup>70</sup> Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, 208.

many of her twentieth-century commentators into confusion and disarray.”<sup>71</sup> Much of Margery’s self-promoting writing resonates with a modern world that is involved in “the idea of self”, from Freud to Jung, to Jacques Lacan. It is an interesting coincidence, and one that seems appropriate in analyzing Margery’s journey through the language of her book.

Also important to note in Margery’s case, was the emergence of the medieval sense of self. Colin Morris cites Walter Ullmann’s thoughts on the appearance of this unique phenomenon of self in his book *The Individual in Medieval Society*. Ullmann describes this new development of self and the “formulation of an idea of the individual” which was, I propose, an important factor in Margery’s self-promoting decisions.<sup>72</sup> Renaissance achievements, specifically the attainment of a sense of individuality, had their stirrings in the Middle Ages, and Margery Kempe capitalized on this beginning self-awareness and self-expression five-hundred years before it is labeled psychoanalytic by deliberately distancing herself from religious and societal tradition.

After being closed for five centuries, the pages of Margery’s book are again opened and her voice is again heard. What appears on the pages is a conundrum, a woman very different than the perceived medieval norm, and since analysis has been nonexistent to this point, the book becomes fertile ground for psychological exploration. An examination of the self-endorsing method that Margery uses to promote her unique and singular identity through her pilgrimages exemplifies many of Jacques Lacan’s concepts, especially those regarding discourse and perception, the gaze, and the real.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* (London and Southampton: The Camelot Press Ltd., 1972), 6.

<sup>73</sup> Lacan, *The Language of the Self*.



Lacan's viewpoint concerning "perception" is instructive in understanding Margery's written advancement of herself through the honest depth of her dialogue, and its underlying purpose. Margery's "interaction between discourse and perception . . . [in which] language . . . is or becomes primary" is an important focus in reading the *Book*.<sup>74</sup> I would argue that Margery had an innate sense of presupposition and understood if she supplied the correct language the intended perception would follow. Margery employed language: homely--her meditative "dalyawns" with Christ, critical and shaming—her suffering as a martyr, and semiotics—to show her close relationship with the holy Family--as the language of her book to assist in interpretation of her overlying theme of saintliness.

It is important to note that what Margery's writing lacks, such as historical, family, or journey details, could be her method of focusing the readers gaze. By directing the reader to focus on "the real" as far as Margery's vision was concerned suggests a Lacanian interpretation of her method, "The Real is not synonymous with external reality, but rather what is real for the subject."<sup>75</sup> We can extrapolate that what was real for Margery was her religious quest and therefore she crafted a language which highlighted numerous appraisals of her selfless, saintly, and sacrificial deeds. Lacan's seminar on vision titled "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit*" seems almost a text book description of Margery's vocational journey and the manner in which she cleverly fashioned her words to lead the reader to see the reality she wished them to see, which was her validating pilgrimages, or in Lacanian terms, "that of the object as cause of

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<sup>74</sup> Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, 226.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

desire.”<sup>76</sup> An example that highlights an important instance in which Margery used a journey to help focus the readers gaze was her trip to Norwich to visit Julian. Margery questioned the religious validity of her “compunccyon, contricyon, swetnesse and devocyon . . . to wetyn yf ther wer any deceyte in hem.”<sup>77</sup> Julian of Norwich, a recognized holy woman also considered a prophet advocated in Margery’s behalf, “Settyth al yowr trust in God and feryth not the langage of the world, for the mor despyte, schame, and repref that ye have in the world the mor is yowr meryte in the sygth of God.”<sup>78</sup> Margery employs Julian’s elite religious status to direct the reader to see a woman, Margery, persecuted for her faith (the object), which will gain her desire (holiness) through this saintly woman’s validation.

Lacan uses the painting by Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, to give visualization to his meaning of the gaze. Although the painting seems to be simply of two scholars, there are also many objects that reflect religious discord. But most importantly, vision is profoundly confused in gazing at this work of art by an image of a skull that can only be viewed in the painting by looking at a certain angle. A distorted image in a painting is called anamorphic, which is Greek and defined as, ana-back or again, and morphe-shape or form.<sup>79</sup> Lacan’s interpretation of the gaze as anamorphic is the crux in understanding Margery’s insistence in giving shape, morphe, to her religion through pilgrimage and holy discourses or “ana”. Holbein’s “Ambassadors,” like Margery, are caught not between two worlds but intertwined in two worlds. What the viewer sees in looking at the picture is not definitive because it depends on the angle of the gaze. Margery, much like

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<sup>76</sup> Scott, “Lacan’s ‘Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*’ As Anamorphic Discourse, 328.

<sup>77</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 956-957.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 983-985.

<sup>79</sup> The National Gallery London, <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hans-holbein-the-younger-the-ambassadors>.



Holbein, crafts her writing so that the reader sees the “real”, the earthly and heavenly Margery, by viewing her through spiritual revelations--such as her conversation with Julian of Norwich-- and other devout encounters in her text. Albrecht Classen proposes, “many medievalists have recognized Kempe’s writing as unique in its literary style, religious intent, and narrative structure, and have also described it as a highly remarkable document of religious experience, reflecting a woman’s personal self-awareness in literary form.”<sup>80</sup> Classen describes a woman very aware of herself and her goals in crafting a controversial masterpiece by guiding or placing the reader in the correct site line for “seeing” her saintliness.

Margery’s tenacity at age sixty to commit her life to text could be interpreted as a validating effort not only for her readers but for herself. Lacan describes this search for the real in ourselves: “The very fact of the repeatedly renewed attempt to represent the gaze indicates that it at once appeals to and eludes interpretation . . . repeated attempts to define the gaze [are] signs of an insistence on the part of the real.”<sup>81</sup> Margery’s daily office “wyth plentyuows terys and boystows sobbyngys, wyth lowed cryingys and schille schrykyngys,” her devotional meditations, and her clerical discourses, could be envisioned as being constricting and circular, or anamorphous as she attempts to “see” her way.<sup>82</sup> Lacan explains, “The practice of anamorphosis is closely linked to the motif of the labyrinth . . . both frustrate the demand to see.”<sup>83</sup> The labyrinth theory worked two ways for Margery. She had been finding her religious way with daily trips to her parish church and by visiting nearby clergy, anchoresses, and shrines. She demonstrated

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<sup>80</sup> Albrecht Classen, *The Power of a Woman’s Voice in Medieval and Early Modern Literatures* (Gottingen, Germany: Hubert & Co., 2007), 273-274.

<sup>81</sup> Scott, “Lacan’s ‘Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a’ as Anamorphic Discourse”, 331.

<sup>82</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 2515-2516.

<sup>83</sup> Scott, “Lacan’s ‘Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a’ as Anamorphic Discourse”, 329.



an exemplary religious vocation which was praiseworthy but not extraordinary. She understood or “saw” that the only way to garner the ultimate virtuous acclaim that she desired was to undertake the crucial trips to the holiest places on earth at that time. An actual pilgrimage with feet upon the earth and mind rested in meditation was the thread that pulled her away from the labyrinth of repeatedly attempting to fit into parish religion. She moved toward a clearer religious goal which, as her book illustrates, was toward saintliness. Margery’s everyday devotions, coupled with her personal visionary experiences, “look” beyond her community, and through the pilgrimage, situates her in a complicated entwinement with heaven and earth. Thus, she leads the reader with her recorded discourse to follow her as she finds her way toward an envisioned holy objective.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The movement/writing model describes the dual nature of Margery Kempe's life journey: to promote her unique identity in order to establish herself in perpetuity as an exceptional holy woman of her time, both in the eyes of God and in the eyes of her community. Movement in the form of the physical pilgrimage elevated her in the eyes of God; the textual pilgrimage allowed her to gain validation in the eyes of her religious community. The supposition that Margery never went on the pilgrimages of which she eventually wrote would, I believe, in her eyes, place her in the same sphere as the hypocrites she despised. Margery's intense physicality coupled with her fervent religious ardor were channeled into the most validating venue available for her at that time, the pilgrimage. Both her active and her writing pilgrimages have the same defining goal, to promote her exceptional saintliness, and using Lacan's theory of the gaze gives a modern perception of Margery's system of self-promotion. In a meditative moment with the Lord, He speaks these words to Margery, "I telle the trewly it is trew every word that is wretyn

... be the it schal be knowyn for very trewth.”<sup>84</sup> The over arching truth inherent in the *Book* is an exemplary religious life, lived through movement and then written.

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<sup>84</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lines 1089-1091.



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